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RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHLP #2008/01 2012025
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 202025Z JUL 07
FM AMEMBASSY LA PAZ
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4397
INFO RUEHAC/AMEMBASSY ASUNCION 6948
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA 4299
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 8185
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES 5429
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 2659
RUEHGT/AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA 0623
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 2828
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 3545
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO 4738
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO 5290
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO 9897
RUMIAAA/USCINCSO MIAMI FL
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA 0426
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RHMFIUU/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL

UNCLAS LA PAZ 002008

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SENSITIVE
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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BL](#)

SUBJECT: MASSIVE DEMONSTRATION TO KEEP LA PAZ AS BOLIVIA'S
CAPITAL

REF: A. LA PAZ 1981
[1](#)B. LA PAZ 1991

This is a spot report as of 1500 July 20.

La Paz Department Takes to the Streets

[1](#)1. News organizations are reporting that up to 2 million residents of El Alto and the city and department of La Paz gathered July 20 in El Alto to show their support for La Paz as the legislative and executive capital of Bolivia (see ref A for an explanation of the capital-movement debate.) Speakers included representatives of the El Alto neighborhood association (FEJUVE), the director of La Paz's biggest university, the leader of the workers guilds, the leader of the federation of campesinos (farmers), a member of the La Paz council, and other community groups. The crowd consists of union workers, cocaleros, and community groups from all corners of the department: in a surprise showing, an indigenous group from Santa Cruz is also supporting the La Paz cause. The cooperative (private) miners who marched on La Paz over the past three days (ref B) have remained in some numbers and are also participating, peacefully, in the demonstration. As is common with Bolivian street gatherings, travel in El Alto is impeded (although not impossible), and one road between the airport and La Paz has been kept open. A number of institutions, including some government offices and banks, are closed in La Paz, and most of El Alto is shut down.

Attendance Strongly Encouraged

[1](#)2. To increase participation in the demonstration (cabildo), public transportation companies offered free rides to the site of the gathering. The La Paz prefecture reportedly sent 200 trucks into the interior to transport campesinos into the city, ensuring greater rural attendance. The Ministry of Labor announced "tolerance" for the day, allowing more public

workers to attend the cabildo by not penalizing absence from work (i.e. public employees are being paid to attend the cabildo). Some private companies provided transportation for their employees and also clothing such as hats or shirts with pro-La Paz slogans and the company name. A number of publicly-owned garbage trucks were fitted with megaphones and circled the city encouraging attendance. (Note: Emboff saw an official car, possibly of a ministry, stop a half-filled bus and force the driver to take on more passengers on the way to El Alto.) Although the GOB is maintaining distance from the event, President Morales is reportedly providing two helicopters to the press to facilitate filming of the event, and state television has been covering the event extensively.

Neither the President nor Vice President is in attendance, despite their preference for maintaining the capital in La Paz. Elected leaders, such as La Paz Prefect Jose Luis Paredes and La Paz Major Juan del Granado, attended but did not speak.

----- Security Measures -----

¶3. The council of the department of La Paz issued a resolution to prohibit the sale and consumption of alcohol between midnight July 19 and midnight July 20 in all of the department of La Paz. Participants in the cabildo met at a number of pre-determined "concentration points" and began marching toward the ultimate destination, in the center of El Alto, from 7:00am July 20. The crowds are large (though probably less than the official estimate of 2 million), and thus far the march has been without major incident (one injury has been reported due to a falling street-light).

Although officially the police blocked vehicle traffic on some roads to protect pedestrians, Emboffs noted that minibus and taxi-drivers used La Paz flags as a sort of "pass": flag-waving and slogan-shouting passengers seem to be enough to persuade the police to let cars pass.

----- Infrastructure and Interruptions -----

¶4. From 10:00am on, many of the streets of El Alto were so filled with people as to be impassable by vehicles, and cell-phone coverage was saturated to the point that most calls could not get through. Access from the El Alto airport to La Paz was controlled by the police (who removed their cordon upon request.) The feel of the event is a combination of protest and street fair. Almost all business in the center of La Paz is shut down, with even small-vendors shuttering their stands instead of trying to sell to the passing crowds. The official speeches ended at 2:30pm, and the crowds are slowly dispersing from El Alto although the streets are likely to be congested for many hours. As of 3:00pm the southern section of La Paz was practically empty, but the lines of vehicles that this morning took residents to El Alto will soon be returning.

----- Politics at Play -----

¶5. The official state information source (ABI) has reported that members of the militant red ponchos group pulled the head of the National Unity Party (UN) Samuel Doria Medina from the speakers' platform to cries of "neo-liberal", reportedly in an attempt to avoid "politicization" of the event. La Paz Prefect Jose Luis Paredes was also reportedly barred from the official platform, and instead stood in the front row of the crowd, waving a Bolivian flag.

¶6. Embassy La Paz will follow up with a post-cabildo analysis cable.
GOLDBERG